

# A Real Stage Tragedy More Shocking Than the Plot of the Play

Miss Carpenter, the Heroine and Leading Lady, Was to Leap Into the Hawaiian Volcano and Be Rescued by the Hero—but Accidentally She Swished Her Grass Dress Into a Gas Jet and Was Burned to Death in Her Lover's Arms



Another Scene from "A Night in Honolulu," Showing the Grass Skirt Worn by Miss Carpenter, Which Caused Her Death When It Was Set on Fire.



At Each Performance of the Play the Hero Snatched the Leading Lady from the Mouth of the Volcano Just as She Was About to Cast Herself Into Its Flames.

THE curtain had fallen on the third act of "A Night in Honolulu." The Opera House in Saugerties, N. Y., was packed to the doors. Everyone in the audience agreed that here was the best play that had come to town for years. And the next and last act promised to be even richer in thrills than those which had gone before.

For just before that curtain had gone down "Kalama," the dark-eyed Hawaiian girl, the heroine of the play, had parted from her lover, crying, "Whatever I may be—even in death I shall love you," and with a swishing of her long grass skirts had fled to the volcano Kilanea to blot out her sorrow by leaping into its flaming mouth.

And the lover had answered, "Whatever you may be, my beloved, I'll save you or burn with you," and had followed her.

The audience sensed what was coming in the next act, and waited for it, tensely. There would be a glimpse of the lip of the famous old Hawaiian volcano, with its crimson flames pulsing wickedly. Kalama would be, of course, saved by that devoted lover, even if she leaped into the flames. There would be thrills in plenty but a happy ending.

Suddenly from behind the gaudily painted curtain came a heartrending scream.

It shrilled through the theatre—high-pitched, pain-filled, supplicating. It stilled the buzzing audience as though it had been the very voice of death.

"Lester! Oh, Lester!" came to the ears of the audience in tones of terror.

Again the scream arose; then broke down in a long, shuddering sobbing. A little wisp of smoke drifted out from the side of the stage—like a ghost.

Fast on the echo of the sobbing came another cry, a man's voice filled with horror and sorrow—"Anna! My Anna!"

The audience stirred, pale faces turning to others as pale. For those cries had been tragedy—no make believe, no acting. What was happening behind the curtain?

A man stumbled out before the footlights. Not until he spoke did the audience recognize him as Lester Smith, the leading man of the play, who only five minutes before, handsome and carefully dressed, had promised Kalama to save her from the volcano or go to death in it with her. Tears were streaming from his eyes. His white linen suit was blackened and charred. One sleeve was burned away.

The hands that hung stiffly at his sides were fire-scarred and there were marks of flame upon his face.

"Anna—Anna Carpenter—" "Kalama"—has been burned," he faltered. "Is there any doctor or medical student here?" He paused for an answer. None answered. "Will someone telephone for help!"—Again came the cry from behind the curtain—despairing, so faint as hardly to be heard—"Lester! Lester!"

The actor turned; ran back. A dozen men in the audience arose and hurried out to telephone for aid.

Aid for what? They did not yet know. Nor did the silent, anxious audience know—as yet. But behind that curtain a real tragedy, more shocking than any even hinted in the plot of the play, had overcome the heroine. Death was there, and death by fire, even as the play had promised. Yet not by any painted volcano spouting make-believe flames had death reached out and touched Anna Carpenter—but by the embrace of actual fires racing through the long, tinder-dry strands of grass that made up the skirt she wore as Kalama.

Instantly, without warning the hand of Death had fallen—ending Anna Carpenter's career on the very brink of success, for the little actress was soon to graduate from the "road show" into Broadway; ending, too, her romance, for Smith and the leading lady were in love and soon to be married.

And that night Anna Carpenter had been in a more than usually happy mood. The last of her troupeau had been bought. In June she and Lester would be married. And, beside that, the weary one-night stands were behind. The company was on its way to play for a week at Hoboken and another at Jersey City—only the river between them and New York, the big city of their dreams.

The third act of "A Night in Honolulu" neared its close. The villain had successfully blackened the character of the lovely Hawaiian girl. Her lover, deep in doubt, had turned eyes of pain upon her. Innocent, but unable to explain away the conspiracies against their happiness, she had, broken hearted, delivered her threat to throw herself down into the fiery pit of the volcano. And the curtain had descended upon her lover declaring that he would follow her—to save her or burn with her.

Anna ran into the dressing room of the opera house. The night was raw. There was no fire in the furnace of the theatre, and to dispel the chill a gas stove had been lighted in the dressing room. The girl, the grass strands of her Hawaiian skirt flying, ran toward Miss Frances Dowling, one of the cast who shared the room with her.

"Frances," she laughed, "I don't know why I feel so terribly gay and happy tonight." She did a little pirouette.

A wind blew through the room from somewhere, and the jets in the gas stove reached out under the draft like little red tongues.

"Don't stand so close to that stove, Anna," called Miss Dowling, sharply, "the grass on your skirt will catch fire."

Then—

"My God," she screamed, "it has!"

One of the little red tongues had reached out and licked a swishing strand of the grass skirt. Instantly a flame raced upward toward Anna's waist.

"Stand still, Anna!" cried Miss Dowling, "stand still." She rushed to a corner, snatched down a bathrobe and leaped to the girl to wrap it around her. But now other strands of the grass skirt were blazing. For an instant Miss Carpenter tried to tear it away from her. Flames leaped up, searing her arms and her bosom.

The pain must have maddened her. She threw open the door and ran into the hall, and just as she passed through a gust of cold wind blew through the passageway. An expressman, calling for the first installment of the company's trunks, had opened the outer door of the theatre. The wind surged up the stairs. It was all the fire needed. As the blast struck the skirt the flames ran through it and billowed around the girl. She stood, for a heart beat, in the centre of a great ball of rosy fire.

Just at her right was the stage. At this instant her lover sauntered off. And it was then that the first agonized scream of "Lester! Oh, Lester!" came from her choking throat.

He leaped toward her and crushed her, all ablaze as she was, in his arms. It

flashed through his mind, oddly, that as he held her now so he had held her scores of times in that mimic rescue which was the climax of the last act. But these fires were real—terribly real—red tongues of agony that were licking up her life and his happiness—together.

Frantically he tried to beat them out. His own light clothing became ablaze. He did not care. His hands were seared, a flame reached up and scorched his mouth. He paid no attention to them.

And the red death defied him. The grass skirt was thick and fed the fire like dried brush.

It seemed as though he had been fighting hours for her life. In actuality it had been seconds. And now stage hands came with heavy woolen blankets. They tore him from the girl, threw the coverings around her, rolled her in them over the floor of the stage. The red of the flames vanished. But from the moaning bundle of agony on the floor wisps of smoke arose. It was one of these that slipped from behind the curtain and that the audience saw—like a ghost. There was a faint odor of burned flesh.

Now the doctors came. They unwrapped the blankets, looked at the poor little burned and blackened body—and shook their heads. Her lover lifted her in his arms and carried her out to the waiting auto that was to carry her to St. Benedict's Hospital at Kingston, forty miles away.

As he placed her in the car consciousness returned to her. She raised her burned arms and clasped his neck.

"I'm going to die, Lester," she said, simply.

"Nonsense, Anna love," he answered. "You're coming through all right. Why, dear, the good God could not be so cruel."

But she shook her head, lapsing into a merciful semi-consciousness. There was no room for him in that car. He followed in another. After a while they let him see her. Only her eyes were visible through the bandages. They were wide with terror. Her lover kissed them.

"Close them, dear," he said. "You are going to be all right."

"When I close them I see red flames," she said. "And, then, I want to look at you as long as I can."

And Strangely the Play Scene Was Duplicated on the Night of Miss Carpenter's Tragedy—But Then It Was Real Fire That Surrounded Her and Real, Torturing Flames That Wrapped Her and Her Lover in Their Destroying Embrace.

"Why, in a week you'll be laughing at this," he forced a laugh himself. "And, Anna, dearest, we'll build your next costume so it can't catch fire."

She looked at him enigmatically—and did not answer. After a little time she spoke again.

"Lester, your love gives you hope. No, I will never need another stage dress. It is God's will; all is for the best." And after a silence she continued, "Lester, dear, do not close the play. Go back. The show must go on. Finish your season." It was the time-honored slogan of the stage.

"You must go now," said the nurse.

"Until tomorrow, sweetheart." He kissed the wide eyes again.

"Until—tomorrow," she whispered.

Smith had been a soldier. With the Three Hundred and Seventieth Artillery he had fought at Belleau Wood and St. Mihiel, in France. Like a soldier he marched back to his duty. It was a Saturday. There could be no matinee, for he must rehearse the understudy for the part of Kalama. That afternoon came a reassuring telegram. He went through the evening performance with a lighter heart. "No news is good news," he said as the curtain fell. He threw an overcoat over the linen suit which as "Bob," the lover of Kalama, he wore in the play. He did not stop to wash off the grease paint. He just had time to catch the last train out to Kingston. It was three in the morning when he arrived and ran to the nearest public telephone station.

"Give me St. Benedict's Hospital," he called. "That you St. Benedict's? How is Anna Carpenter?"

A nurse's voice answered, cool and sharp and impersonal.

"Anna Carpenter died last night!"

Smith sent a message to the girl's mother in Florida asking permission to bury her with his own mother and father out in Illinois.

"Yes," came the answer. "It is where she belongs. We will be at the funeral." And so not many days ago the seared body of the little mime, to whom the opening, was lowered into her grave in Illinois.

But "A Night in Honolulu" will be played no more by the man who loved her.



Miss Anna Carpenter, the Unfortunate Young Leading Lady, in Another Pose of the Play.